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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000190

SIPDIS

BAGHDAD FOR AMBASSADOR ERELI

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: BAHRAIN STREET CLASHES: THE RULES, AND BREAKING THEM

REF: A. MANAMA 50

[B](#). MANAMA 57

[C](#). MANAMA 149

[D](#). MANAMA 172

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: Vandalism and small clashes between Shia youths and police are part of a familiar pattern, but recent attacks on south Asians are an ugly departure from the unwritten rules. End summary.

[2](#). (C) Tensions between Bahrain's ruling Sunni minority and its Shia majority continue to simmer as they have for years. Much of that tension plays out in parliament, the local media, and in private political exchanges between leaders of the Shia community and the government. It also plays out in limited street violence, which occasionally grabs international headlines.

[3](#). (C) Credible contacts in the Shia community tell us that only a small minority supports the bands of Shia youth who clash with police most weekend evenings. These skirmishes have been going on for years, and are most frequent during the cooler weather. They have evolved an unwritten protocol usually observed by both sides: a dozen or so young men burn trash, then stone responding riot police, who then reply with tear gas and rubber baton rounds. Police then pursue, but rarely catch, the rioters. In most cases no one is hurt.

[4](#). (C) We are now seeing an uptick in these scripted street skirmishes, much as we did in early 2008 and last fall. Radical youth supporting Haq Movement leader Hassan Musheima are reacting to his arrest (refs A and B) by redoubling their nighttime efforts to make the police look powerless. Friday, March 27 was a typical weekend night: a half dozen bands of youth, each 10- to 20-strong, started garbage fires in Shia villages around the island. Many protesters dispersed when police appeared; some drove to other villages to start more fires.

[5](#). (C) Several aspects of these protests remain constant: First, the numbers of protesters are small, on the order of 100-200 in the whole country. (By way of comparison, the mainstream Shia Wifaq party put 20,000 orderly demonstrators on the street last June.) Second, the riot police (intensively trained by the French national police) seem able to cope with these situations in a restrained manner. Third, the clashes are generally confined to a few Shia villages.

Breaking the Rules with Attacks on South Asians

¶6. (C) However, during the uptick now underway, one development may have put stress on the unwritten rules for Shia-police encounters: As we reported in refs C and D, young supporters of Musheima have in at least three instances turned on south Asian guest workers; one Pakistani man was burned to death. All of Bahrain's religious and political leaders have condemned the attacks, with the notable exception of the Haq movement and its imprisoned leader Hassan Musheima. Musheima's admirers on the street resent south Asians because many street-level policemen are Pakistanis.

Comment

¶7. (C) The attacks on south Asians raise the risk that angry or fearful policemen might overreact during a future confrontation with Shia youths. The attacks may also reinforce the government's own inclination to alter the rules of the game. In meetings over the past six months with the King, Crown Prince, Interior Minister, and chief of police, CDA has heard repeated expressions of exasperation with Shia youth violence, and a determination to prosecute violent demonstrators. However, pressure from detainees' families after past crackdowns has led to pardons for Shia street demonstrators; we expect the pressure would be just as strong this time round, and the revolving door in Bahrain's jails will continue to spin.

¶8. (C) We will provide via septel an update on the government's political engagement with the Shia opposition.

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